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'Leaking' for political gain

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Journalists don't usually report and tell. This time, one did, and he provided a revealing glimpse into the world of Washington "leaks" and the way national security is used for partisan political purposes.

Benjamin F. Schlemmer, editor of the Armed Forces Journal, told a House subcommittee how he was contacted by the Pentagon and offered an exclusive briefing on the secret Air Force "Stealth" aircraft program. Schlemmer said he was encouraged to write about the program and was told that other reporters would not be briefed until after his article appeared.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown released information on the program at a news conference last Friday, two days after Schlemmer's article was published. Brown said he was doing so in part because of articles about the subject. Brown said that the development, which is supposed to enable U.S. aircraft to elude Soviet radar, would neutralize Soviet air defenses. "This alters the military balance significantly," boasted Brown.

The Pentagon says that other stories about Stealth prompted Brown to hold his conference. If so, why the special briefing for Schlemmer? Why was Schlemmer told that Brown would wait until his article appeared?

This has all the earmarks of a staged leak to enable the administration to pat itself on the back. It's another example of the misuse of "secret" labels. If it

suits your purpose to breach security, then you leak the information; if the information is embarrassing, then you hide it by invoking national security and by punishing the leakers.

An example of the selective invocation of national security is the way the Central Intelligence Agency for years censored works by former agency employees to keep information from the public that was merely embarrassing.

The Carter administration, which leaked the Stealth story so assiduously, recently subjected some of its highest officials to an FBI investigation and required them to sign affidavits in a search for the source of leaks about the sale of arms to Morocco. President Carter was reported to be enraged by that secrecy breach. The administration seems to have little or no interest in tracking down the source of Stealth stories.

Which brings us to national security and the political campaign. Charges of missile gaps and the like invariably surface during a presidential election. The stress being laid by Republicans on preparedness means that national security issues will figure heavily in the campaign. A portent of things to come was Defense Secretary Brown's appearance at the Democratic National Convention.

National security issues are important and complex. They deserve informed debate. Americans won't get it if the issues are treated as just another subject for political manipulation.